

Interdependence

A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church

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Isaiah 11:1-10

12/8/2019, Second Sunday of Advent

King Ahaz, what have you done, dude?!? That's not a deal you wanna make. Ever. Even when you are forced to play your hand.

It's the 730s. And Assyria's the superpower in the region. They have a fun game. Do what we tell you, pay us lots of taxes, and maybe, maybe we won't squash you. The folks in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, as well as their neighboring Arameans in Damascus aren't too keen on being bullied. They choose to rebel.

King Ahaz rules the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and his ancient kin ask him to join in their rebellion. He declines, but Ahaz doesn't stay neutral. Ahaz makes a deal with the Assyrians. The deal saves his kingdom in the short term, but spells imminent doom for the Northern Kingdom, which will be utterly decimated by the Assyrians within ten years. And ultimately, this deal weakens Judah's autonomy and independence in the region.

Ahaz is the kind of king we're used to. He's the kind of king who seeks to do what is politically expedient in the moment, regardless of how that expediency might affect the welfare of his people. If Ahaz lived today, he'd be the kind of ruler who would value oil revenue over human welfare, votes in November and a job in January over truth and integrity, and spin over substance.

Isaiah, like all of us, hopes that the next leader will reflect a world undergirded in God rather than idols. Perhaps Hezekiah will represent a new branch, a righteous branch, an authentic branch, a covenant branch.

And Isaiah imagines what kind of world a righteous leader, one called by God, one empowered by God, and one being led by God, can help illumine for his or her people. The prophet envisions a time when all of the things that are in contradiction, competition, and opposition with one another will work together in harmony. Wild animals, the wolf, the bear, and the leopard, occupy the same spaces as domesticated animals like the cow, the lamb, and the calf. These

opposites don't exist to bring about the destruction of the other, but rather to let the gifts of their counterparts make them more whole.

I think there's a temptation, in any age, whether it's in Isaiah's age, or the one we live in now, to equate his oracle with a specific ruler, who will bring about a specific set of changes. Please don't use this as a proof text for or against impeachment, or for or against the historical merits of King Ahaz or King Hezekiah, or rulers in any time period. I think to do so, is to believe in a zero-sum-gain-world that stands in utter contradiction to the realm God is working fervently to restore.

Our hope is not in earthly kings. Our hope is not in earthly kingdoms. Our hope is in God, because God doesn't rule like any kind of king we know, nor does God's kingdom operate like any kind of kingdom we expect.

The systems of this world have beaten us down. And they have claimed independence. Powerful rulers must be independent of God. Their privilege must be independent from their people. Their truth must be independent from reality. Their wealth must be independent from the dependent. Their justice must be independent from righteousness. There is a hoarding – a hoarding of power, of resources, of dignity, of respect, of love, of value, of privilege, a hoarding of humanity; and this hoarding creates the misnomer that any of these good things are finite. For surely, if my neighbors have something, anything, it's got to come at the detriment of somebody else.

But the kind of ruler, and the kind of world, and the kind of system that God proclaims is not one of independence. It's one of interdependence. God's realm is steeped in mutuality: God, people, creatures, and land, all living in accordance with a divine covenant.

You see, we have this belief that God's reckoning, or God's inbreaking realm is the act of a pendulum swinging in an opposite direction. And when we reach the apex of this new movement, the setting right is a knocking down of the current kingdom. But Isaiah's vision isn't a wrecking ball. It's a restoration.

It's not that the meek become mighty and the mighty meek, nor that the dominant are now the dominated. That's a wrecking ball of retribution. It's that

both the gentle and the giant can coexist, not in competition for survival, but in the knowledge of enoughness. And that, friends, is the creative hand of restoration and renewal. God is not a ruler who smashes, but rather a ruler who builds up.

The text envisions a planet where all beings are as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters that cover the seas. There is peace. Needed peace. Can you imagine such a vision?!? An ocean of interdependence. An acknowledgement that everything around us has value. A wholeness rooted in God, and shared generously with all who would claim it, and even those who wouldn't. And peace. Peace from the exhausting dependence on independence.

When we open ourselves to such a vision, we open ourselves to the possibility of a new king. We open ourselves to the idea that God's messiah, or God's anointed will look less like Hezekiah, and more like a no-name Nazarean from a never-has-been region with the undeniable ability to make God evident in a life of service, humility, fidelity and love. We imagine a king that transcends earthly kings. And even more audacious of an idea: we imagine that God's realm, God's kingdom, God's world is right here and right now, each and every moment we mimic the ministry and spirit of that unlikely king.

Sardis Baptist Church, it's the Sunday of peace. And peace is coming, if only we can open ourselves to wishing, hoping, working for a kingdom of interdependence. This Sunday, there's no need to seek a castle or a palace. For we have a king who offers kinship at the table in front of us. May we find peace there, as we wait for the peace of God's presence among us in Bethlehem.

Star light, star bright, first light I see tonight. I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight!

With peace, we ask that it may be so, and that it might be soon. Amen.